

## dormiveglia (in between sleeping and waking)

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Fandoms:	<a href="#">陈情令   The Untamed (TV)</a> , <a href="#">魔道祖师 - 墨香铜臭   Módào Zǔshī - Mòxiāng Tóngxiù</a>
Relationships:	<a href="#">Lan Zhan   Lan Wangji/Wei Ying</a> , <a href="#">Wei Wuxian</a> , <a href="#">Jiang Yanli/Jin Zixuan</a> , <a href="#">Jiang Cheng</a> , <a href="#">Jiang Wanyin &amp; Wei Ying</a> , <a href="#">Wei Wuxian</a> , <a href="#">Wei Ying</a> , <a href="#">Wei Wuxian &amp; Wen Qing</a> , <a href="#">Jiang Yanli &amp; Wei Ying</a> , <a href="#">Wei Wuxian</a> , <a href="#">Wei Ying</a> , <a href="#">Wei Wuxian &amp; Wen Ning</a> , <a href="#">Wen Qionglin &amp; Wen Qing</a> , <a href="#">Nie Huaisang &amp; Wei Ying</a> , <a href="#">Wei Wuxian</a> , <a href="#">Jiang Cheng</a> , <a href="#">Jiang Wanyin &amp; Nie Huaisang</a>
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# **dormiveglia (in between sleeping and waking)**

by [comforting\\_monachopsis](#)

## Summary

“The Yiling Laozu kept a journal,” they say. Greedy eyes pore the pages for secrets to godlike power.

What they find instead is a mortal man’s tragedy.

## words written (never spoken)

“Wei Wuxian is dead! He’s dead and he left a journal!”

“Are they going to read it?”

“All it will be are the ramblings of a madman!”

“Hah! Like you wouldn’t like to taste the kind of power he has!”

“What do you expect? A monster like that... oh these things are better left alone.”

“They’re only managing to restore it page by page. They didn’t realize it was there when they burnt his little lair to the ground.”

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*Casually interrupting a Jin banquet (do these fuckers ever eat normally what the hell) and demanding Wen Ning’s location was... not ideal. I may have lost it but I definitely have a right to when it was a Jin disciple who was almost branded last time I saw something like this. Granny has one. What a sick turnabout!*

*A peony in the place of a sun on the ends of those irons. Jin Guangshan has plans.*

*What do you expect from these people?*

*Casualty count was four Jins. Wonder what the number will be blown up to by morning? I’ll put in money for at least ten times that.*

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“The thing is... why are you letting them read it? And publicly?! Your clan has confiscated most of his inventions by now!” Su Minshan shakes his head with a little frown. Jin Guangyao laughs.

“Shan-er, what does it matter? He never knew the hand I played. And he’s dead. If anything, cleaning his image when it does us no good will boost both of our images.”

Su She isn’t moved.

“Complacency isn’t your thing, Lianfeng-zun. You saw what it said about your sect.”

“I’m not, Shan-er. Just waiting for the iron to heat. Wouldn’t the Jiang sect look nice with a name change?”

And that changes the atmosphere instantly. Su She laughs.

“So your next target is...”

“I don’t trust them, especially if they’re building up,” Jin Guangyao nods. “And they betrayed him, didn’t they? I’m sure Wei Wuxian hated them in the end.” Su She toys with the pommel of his sword.

“They won’t mind you. Aren’t you already dealing with the Nies? You’re going to overwork yourself.”

“Ah, Shan-er, you worry too much!”

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*I hate being back here. I hate it and it’s cold and I have to keep reminding myself that this is the right thing*

*~~Lan Zhan and I made a promi-~~*

*I owe them. Wen Ning and Wen Qing saved us. ~~They did more than that.~~*

*They sects are demanding the seal for what I’ve done. I never should have made that stupid thing.*

*The worst part is that if I break it, it will kill me. There is flat out no way around this.*

---

“Didn’t you hear? The siege only happened because Wei Wuxian let it!” A Ye cultivator shakes his head. His friend laughs.

“That’s obvious! The Yiling Laozu could take on armies thrice the size of the siege. Nevernight City was probably child’s play to him!”

“So he fixed one thing in his dog life, hah?! What do I care! Better that he killed himself!”

“Why did he even do it? Revenge?”

“Like that bastard needed a reason!”

“I was training outside the Jin Sect’s public reading... he said he owed the Wen-dogs something,” a Fu cultivator whispers. His friend hushes him.

“Probably a key to his power. Don’t forget Wen Ruohan was doing the same evil path.”

“But Wei Wuxian did it better... and he wasn’t on their side in the war,” the Fu cultivator frowns. A He cultivator snorts.

“Killing a few Wen-dogs doesn’t make him a better person. What? Are you on his side now or something?! Even Jiang-zongzhu, who was raised his brother, realized what he was in the end!”

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*I was working on a talisman that would help grow potatoes in this soil. ~~Fuck, I miss potatoes.~~ I suppose that’ll do just fine if I could buy them. But if Wen Qing yells at me about radishes one more time I may just lay down and cry.*

*Radishes!*

*~~I’ve eaten worse~~*

*Poor A-Yuan is so young! And he must have been undernourished ~~like I was when Uncle Jiang foun~~ in those Jin camps. Jin Zixuan is lucky he’s become tolerable. I’ll allow it if it makes Shijie happy ~~do I even have a right in the affairs of Jiang clan members I’m just an outsider now~~ but the gentry aren’t my problem. My problem is that Granny is old and I don’t know how she’s going to survive the winter. She won’t take my talismans because she won’t let me use my blood*

*~~Wen Qing must have told her.~~*

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“The latest released page was even weirder, don’t you think?” A young Ouyang cultivator murmurs to the Qin cultivator that filled him in. But the Qin cultivator shakes his head.

“It wouldn’t shock me if a Wen-dog had him under their control. Who knows what a Wen-dog would do with the opportunity!”

“Not that... he’s talking about a child?” A Yao cultivator fills his cup with tea and shakes his head. “Jin-zongzhu said they were cultivators. Militants.” The Qin cultivator laughs darkly.

“Maybe one of those Wen cultivators was a woman. Maybe owing Wen Qing had... a different meaning!”

“Pfft, he’d be so afraid of having a bastard on his name he really might,” the Yao cultivator cackles. The Ouyang cultivator laughs.

“Sect Leader Jin truly must be truly unflappable then, more than the Lans!”

“He said ‘us’ like Jiang Cheng owed her too. Did they use her like a whore and not know who the child belonged to?”

The Ouyang cultivator pales.

“Hey! You can’t say shit like that about a sect leader!”

“I heard nothing, man,” the Qin cultivator grins behind his teacup. A Jin disciple waves a careless hand.

“Chill out, bro! Now what else did it say?”

“I don’t get what radishes and potatoes had to do with anything,” the Ouyang continues. “Something feels off to me.” The Qin cultivator shakes his head.

“Bloodthirsty army’s gotta eat. Maybe it’s what they stole?”

“None of the Yiling townspeople had any complaints. Gusu checked.”

The Jin and Qin cultivators snigger.

“Those stuck up bastards are all about their rules and haughty no gossip bullshit, and they’re listening just as much!”

“Ugh. GusuLan? LanlingJin is objectively the only worthwhile sect of the bunch.” The Jin disciple nods haughtily.

“Obviously! Look what we’re contending with! A hopeless heir with a leader bound to be short lived, a bunch of posers, and a little sprout after getting crushed. Yes. The other three great sects! I’m *so-o-o* scared!”

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*Wen cultivators? That’s what this dick said? There’s only one person who could even use a current core on this damn mountain and she’s a doctor. And Wen Ning is... incapacitated. Quite frankly I don’t even know what the fuck I count as. And everyone else?*

*They’re all farmers and carpenters who are at least twice my age. At least. And the only child left.*

*How many of those bones down there were from little arms?*

*Why am I surprised? Wen Chao did the same thing to Lotus Pier, right down to throwing the dying into a pile of corpses—the only difference was that I had somewhere to go back to.*

*What a fucking joke. I didn't escape if I had to come running back.*

*Where else could I take them? Jiang Cheng would never understand. I couldn't ask this of him anyway.*

*I promised Madam Yu, after all. I promised her and I promised Jiang Cheng that I would always do what was best for them.*

*And like she said. I'm the worst.*

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“The audacity to call a sect leader a vulgar word in a written document,” a Lan cultivator frowns at his tea in a shop. The common folk are probably eavesdropping. No matter.

“That’s what you’re focusing on?! The claim Wei Wuxian is making changes the *entire* narrative!” A Nie cultivator shakes his cup wildly. “I’m more concerned that we might have been involved in something terrible. I wasn’t... I wasn’t there but—“

“The Yiling Laozu killed thousands of righteous cultivators, who cares about the good he did,” a Jin disciple interrupts haughtily. The Nie cultivator shakes his head.

“Bro... it’s not just Wei Wuxian who’s dead! The other Wens... did we *kill* innocent civilians?”

“If you were there, shouldn’t you know?!”

“I wasn’t,” the Nie cultivator snaps. Another Lan disciple shakily raises his hand, face pale.

“I was.”

“And?”

“Nobody even paid attention to who was left. If they were there, they were killed.”

“And their numbers?”

“The Jins there claimed to have thinned them out already...” the Lan disciple begins to look sick. “They said the camps did a great job at it.”

“So...?”

The Lan is trembling in earnest now.

“There’s no proof of Wei Wuxian lying. And why would he lie? That was his own journal?”

“Then we... really might have...”

“That man was insane anyway,” a Zhao disciple sniffs. “Jiang-zongzhu himself said that Wei Wuxian had a hero complex. I wouldn’t be surprised if he had some sort of delusion.”

“Then we attacked a madman who needed *help*,” the Nie cultivator growls. “There’s no situation beyond him *lying* in his *own fucking journal* that makes us the good guys here.”

“He’s a demonic cultivator!”

“The Wen cultivated the jiandao too,” their waiter says softly. Their eyes snap to her, and she gasps when she realizes she’d spoken out loud.

“I- This one is so sorry, this one didn’t intend to offend that was an inside thou-“

“You’re right,” the elder Lan frowns. “But there are separate evils. Both of them committed a wrong. Even if one of them was on our side.”

“Bold words for someone who only *won* because of that wrong,” a man jeers from across the room.

That was right. Wei Wuxian had won the righteous sects a war with his own hands. He was the only reason the great sects still stood. And they killed him and those under his protection.

The restaurant falls silent.

“Is nobody going to talk about how he mentioned not being able to use a golden core?”

“I don’t know what he meant by that. I really don’t know.”

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*Jiang Cheng tried to convince me to leave the Wens. He’s trying to look out for me.*

*Doesn’t he realize that I’m his weakness?*

*I had to leave. And we had to fight.*

*I hate fighting him.*

*So while I heal and Wen Qing yells at me for being stupid on this injury because I don’t heal like a cultivator anymore, I need to get an array to clean more soil. We have more seeds now!*

*I’m lucky they know what they’re doing.*



*If I was stronger— if I wasn't this fucking frail— I'd be able to help them. But they're just as withered as I am. We'll crumple to ashes together.*

*At least we won't be doing it alone.*

*What will happen to A-Yuan and the Wen siblings? They're demanding Wen Ning's head still.*

*Who will keep them safe from the ones who want them as tools or trophies or both?*

*1- Artificial core? Ask Wen Qing. ~~Could I replace mine?~~*

*2- Fix that timing error on the compasses. Fourth Uncle got attacked by a wandering ghost on his way to the market again.*

*3- Repair ward on Blood Pool. Last assassination attempt broke it. They've been after the Yin Hu Fu more often. ~~Stupid thing will listen to anybody.~~*

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“Wei Wuxian definitely didn't have a core,” a merchant whispers over the table. The room of common folk listen raptly. “He did *all* of that without a core.”

“Of course he died so easily then,” the innkeeper snaps his fingers like he'd cracked a complicated riddle. “For such a powerful figure the death seemed so mundane.”

“I don't know... he said breaking the Yin Hu Fu would kill him from the beginning,” the merchant shakes his head. “I think he killed himself knowingly when he destroyed it.”

“And what's that?”

“Yin Hu Fu? What a weird name!”

“A weapon of mass destruction The Yiling Laozu created. A dark artifact that he arrogantly tried to hold onto instead of handing off to be contained,” a courtesan tilts her fan. “I've danced for the Jins before. Heard enough from the background chatter.”

“How could you hand it off and trust anyone to not use such a thing against you?” A former soldier shakes his head. “There are some things people just can't do.”

“You're calling a demon like that *human*?”

“He was in the end, wasn't he?”

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*And am I not terrible? For wanting back what I gave away? I think I may just be a terrible person.*

*How selfish I am!*

*I owed this to Uncle Jiang because it's my fault this happened in the first place and I promised I'd atone- what I liar I've made of myself!*

*~~It's so empty where my soul once sat and I'm colder than I remembered. I think if my own fragility or the fact that everyone wants me dead doesn't kill me first, the cold will. Or maybe it'll make me do it.~~*

*~~The blood of the living is warm. Would my blood keep me from freezing to death?~~*

---

“So it’s accepted that Wei Wuxian didn’t have a core... but the wording was gave away. And what do the Jiangs have to do with it?”

“Didn’t you heard the latest rumor? The Lord of the Jiang Clan suddenly requested Wei Wuxian’s sword be returned!”

“Didn’t they say it sealed itself?” A younger merchant pours more tea for the crowd. His older friend nods.

“That’s what makes it all so confusing!”

The innkeeper points at a man in an expensive silk robe.

“You’re a scholar... what do you make of this?”

“I can’t possibly claim to understand the ways of immortals. Because the only picture I can put together requires an act of absolute selflessness. If I dare admit it... I don’t think there are people who would do it for the emperor,” the scholar shakes his head. A young man steps forward.

“Which is?”

“What is your craft? You look like an artisan,” the scholar notes with a smile. The young man nods in acknowledgement.

“I’m a potter.”

“Is everyone in your family a potter?” The scholar seems to be confirming something before he asks. The young man nods happily.

“Everyone,” he answers. The scholar smiles.

“Do you have a younger brother you’re close with?”

“Yes,” the young potter confirms. The scholar nods, satisfied.

“If your younger brother were to suddenly lose a good part of his physical strength and his ability to do pottery, what would you do?”

Everyone gasps. What a question!

“I’d support him! That’s an awful loss, how could you imply-“

“If someone gave you the opportunity then, to give him that much of your physical strength, maybe even more, and your ability to do pottery, would you? Know this, you’d never be able to use a pottery wheel the same way again. If at all.”

And that... that makes them feel sick. Who could bear to part with the craft they’d carefully built up with young hands to their own now? Forever?

“I... don’t think I could. A man has to eat,” the potter pales. And the scholar continues.

“And if you did, you’d tell him, wouldn’t you? Even if he’d live in guilt for the rest of his life?”

“Of course I would! He’d be heartbroken if I just gave up the family tra- oh. Is that what you think Wei Wuxian did?”

“The only way all of these writings could come together is if Wei Wuxian knowingly sacrificed his greatest power and made sure his sect brother never felt guilt for it. But it doesn’t make sense,” the scholar sighs. Everyone nods. Except for the women in the far corner. She has a sword by her hip. She just shakes her head.

“It would, actually,” she says softly. Her voice is almost thin with something raw none of them can name. It’s almost guilty. The merchant frowns at the sight of the sword. No doubt a woman to not be trifled with.

“Ah, who are you?”

“I’m a wandering cultivator. I knew Wei Wuxian once,” she says. In the low light, she looks dangerous.

“What is your name, Daoshi-sanren?”

She steps forward and bows politely.

“This one is called Luo Qingyang. I cultivated under the LanlingJin sect once,” she smiles. And oh, she’s really rather pretty. The young merchant from before steps towards her nervously.

“What do you mean it would make sense?”

“Did you hear about the time before the campaign started? After Cloud Recesses burned but before Lotus Pier?” She takes a sip of her tea as murmurs spread through the tavern. The young potter raises a hand.

“Didn’t the Wen Clan attempt an indoctrination?”

“Basically a flaunting of power and an attempt to use us as living bait or servants. Wei Wuxian kept everyone’s spirits up by refusing to bow his head and submit,” she sighs. “He saved all the sect heirs there with the help of Jiang-zhongzhu.”

“Oh! That’s the time he fought a Xuanwu of Slaughter with Hanguang-jun, isn’t it?”

Qingyang-Sanren smiles softly, almost guilty in the smile’s weakness.

“He took a brand to the chest for me and he didn’t even know me. A special brand that would scar even a cultivator. It was the type that could destroy a meridian and cripple cultivation forever. They aimed it for my face and he took it to the chest,” Qingyang-Sanren laughs sadly. “He’s kind. A terrible flirt. He didn’t deserve what happened to him.”

“Would it destroy a core?”

“No, saving me definitely didn’t do it, because he used his sword shortly after,” she snorts inelegantly. “Got Wen Chao pretty well too.”

“So it’s possible?”

“I’d say probable,” Luo-Sanren frowns. “He loved his sword and was the top talent of our generation beside Lan er-gongzi. There was a reason he was the fourth most eligible bachelor of our time without having a the background of heir or main family to his name. You know, it was Wen Zhuliu, The Core Melting Hand, that he went after him and Wen Chao first. Wen Chao, his vendetta made sense. But maybe there was something more to the way he let Wen Zhuliu be tortured than I thought.”

A woman tugs on her robes, an impish grin on her face.

“They said he was hideous, did the demonic cultivation change his face?”

“Nope,” she grumbles with a small, sad smile. “As obnoxiously good-looking as ever. Thinner, though. And less happy. He was always smiling when I saw him before the war.” The pretty cultivator shakes her head. Hoping to cheer her up, the young merchant approaches her.

“Ah... this is my first time meeting a cultivator... can you tell us your adventures!”

Seemingly thankful for the distraction, she perks up.

“Gladly! So there was this haunting out in Wang family village...”

---

*Lan Zhan came by today. He was in the middle of some sect business. But he's such a good person that he stopped by for me.*

*His poor face when A-Yuan clung to his leg hahaha! That will make me laugh for days to come!*

*He's a bright star in this rundown place. It's better for him if he never comes back.*

*I hope he doesn't.*

*~~I don't know what I'd do if he kept coming back like he actually wanted to stay with me.~~*

*Gusu needs their Jade. Shijie is marrying that stupid peacock. The world does perfectly fine without me there. I'm where I'm needed.*

*It would be selfish of me to leave.*

*I think a part of me longs for him. He's a good man and a good friend. When he's by my side in his silent way, when he doesn't drag a fight from me, I feel stable. More than I have since the beginning of this damn mess.*

*And it's a pathetic kind of longing. I want and I want in a way that's so desperate and shameless. But what have I ever been beyond that? He makes me feel like things are normal again. ~~Til he opens his mouth and tries to drag me back to punish me at Gusu.~~*

*Anyways! Positives! Wen Ning is back. Lan Zhan really helped with that. It's good to see him again. If I was faster this never would have happened. ~~They used my own lure flag to stab him through the chest.~~*

*It appears the list of positives is rapidly dwindling. But I'm trying.*

---

“The Ghost General was like a person, mostly,” a Sun cultivator whispers. “I was in Yiling to scout out what the Yiling Laozu was up to and he was amicable enough. Selling radishes and shyly talking to townspeople.”

“He's still a Wen, they're all innately evil or something,” a Yang cultivator frowns. “You know what happened to our sects!”

“Hanguang-jun once said that Wei Wuxian was a genius,” a Li cultivator offers. “Maybe he fixed that?”

A Wu cultivator shakes his head.

“What I don’t get is their relationship. Everyone knew they were like cats and dogs on the battlefield! Always fighting! But somehow they were close?”

“Hangunag-jun had to have cared about him to deign to speak to him,” the Yang cultivator points out. “And Wei Wuxian called them friends.”

A Rong cultivator laughs.

“Dear me. If that’s friendship then I’m doing it wrong!”

“I’m not sure what to focus on here, the implicit accusations of crimes against war prisoners that might have been civilians, or the fact that Wei Wuxian might have been unwittingly in love with Hanguang-jun.”

“Both? Both sounds good,” the Wu cultivator laughs. “But really... what were our sects tied up in? This doesn’t seem right.”

“The longer we read these the more wrong our actions feel,” the Yang cultivator agrees. “I don’t like this pattern.”

# nothing's gonna hurt you (the way the words do when they settle in your skin)

~~*I need to get back to reality.*~~

~~*In my dreams I reach out to him and his robes fade in the sun's light. He's too pure for me to touch and taint.*~~

~~*I'd destroy him like everything else. And he's not mine to break.*~~

~~*He was my match, a good friend that I'd hoped to tease throughout a lifetime. He will soon outlive me.*~~

---

"They kept saying which lines were crossed out," the town gossip whispers to the washerwoman.

"Knowing they had a deep bond in each other makes it even more tragic," the washerwoman sighs. The gossip taps a finger to her lip, as if in thought.

"I wonder if Hanguang-jun is in seclusion because he's mourning?"

"That's starting to seem probable," the washerwoman nods.

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*I found a way to properly cultivate resentful energy, but the way I am now... the Yin Hu Fu literally blew out my chances and the way I had to attempt all of this with no prior understanding when Wen Chao threw me in here for three months... Truly worthless piece of metal now. But it broke the siege when I was still refining every aspect of the methods.*

*Before I only fought with resentful energy. But it's really just a yin version of spiritual energy. Floats around like qi, but sticks together like the yin elements. Resentful energy is just a mess of someone else's emotions inside of power. Makes it stronger but more suited to the person it belonged to. But that's something I knew already.*

*Another assassin. It's getting worse. One of the aunties was almost killed today. She didn't notice. Wen Ning did.*

~~*Fuck, loneliness is a hell of a drug.*~~ *Wen Ning and Wen Qing are so focused on the others, A-Yuan is the only one who keeps my company much these days.*

*He's so precious and if anything happened to him I would*

*In a way, he reminds me of myself. Hungry and missing his parents. Unable to dust off a full memory of them. I wonder if this is what Uncle Jiang felt so long ago. At least there's more of us to take care of him.*

---

“And that’s what the latest page they could restore said on it,” an outer court Jin disciple told the waiting merchants. The man at the cabbage stand sat down blankly, eyes horrified.

“The Wens weren’t lying about Wei Wuxian being thrown into the Burial Mounds, then? That wasn’t a lie that leaked back to us?”

The outer court Jin disciple’s mother, a washerwoman, cries out.

“But he didn’t have a core! Then... heavens, how much did that man suffer?”

“From living on the streets to the life of mistreatment he’s hinted at from Madam Yu... he’s just lucky the rest of the Jiangs were good to him, because he truly would have gone from one hell to another just like that otherwise,” a man selling tanghulu shakes his head. The man selling baskets next to him shakes his head with a harsh laugh.

“Not that it mattered in the end! If he had his core torn out to give to his brother, was thrown into Diyu on earth, and then had to weaponize himself while facing all of that. Finally the war ends and he’s in peace. Then he had to give it up to protect people who he really should have had the right to pardon— he was still considered Jiang Clan, after all— and was hounded to death!”

“He suffered in so many ways—“ the cabbage man shakes his head— “and still... how could the sects do so much to one man?”

“Honestly, all of what he did feels like a model of restraint now,” a passing merchant shakes his head. “And to think the clans were out there saying he was eating babies or something!”

“If all of this happened to me,” a Qin cultivator frowns in thought, “Well, I would have just... oh I don’t know, killed Wen Ruohan myself instead of bothering with the war and then taken his place!”

His friend stares at him, horrified.

“I can’t believe you’re calling all of that killing restraint! He’s a monster!”

“Was he, though? He said himself that the numbers against him were exaggerated,” a young maiden points out. She flushes when all the eyes land on her. “What? It’s not like we haven’t been hearing the words of the journal!”



“It’s his journal,” the young Jin disciple sighs. “It’s not like a Lan can perform Inquiry on him. We just have to assume his own journal would have the truth.”

The entire street falls silent, down to the eerie chicken crow that breaks it. More cultivators are listening to their conversation now. And none of them look too pleased.

“Oh? Tell me then,” an inner-court Jin disciple snaps in a way that makes the common folk flinch. “And if it is the truth?”

“Then the Jin Clan made pawns of us all,” a Nie cultivator growls.

“I don’t think I’d even be surprised if Jin Zixun and Jin Zixuan’s deaths were planned too. I’ll bet it was planned down to Jiang Yanli’s,” a Yao cultivator hides a wicked grin behind his sleeve. “Besides... weren’t most of Jin Zixun’s men that day sons of elders who fought against Jin Guangshan’s decisions?”

Everyone pales and a Rong cultivator stumbles into the cabbage man’s cart.

“My cabbages!”

Everyone stares at the man in wreckage, whose face is paper-pale. He gasps out his denial, hands shaking.

“That’s... that’s assassination!”

“If they really were immoral enough to do this, do you think they *care* what it’s called?” The Yao cultivator laughs sharply. “Jin Guangshan did seem *very* interested in having the Jin house the Yin Hu Fu, you know.”

“I thought cultivators were supposed to be above earthly desires,” a rogue cultivator spits. “But the sects are just like any other gentry, vying for power and money. And not caring who has die for them to get there.”

---

*Shijie came and asked me to name her unborn son.*

*I chose Rulan.*

*Jiang Cheng made another comment about the Lan. ~~Does everyone expect that fuddy duddy to swallow up my life? He swallows my thoughts when I let him. It's better than the alternative.~~*

*And what’s the issue?! A gentleman among sects and a gentleman among flowers. An upright name for him to grow into. I have to wonder on that estimate if nobody from their sect’s even come to investigate. But I suppose if Zewu-jun trusts his sworn brother he’d trust the man’s father. All it takes is a person to abuse their spot in a web of trust for it all to go crumbling.*

*Meng Yao seemed okay enough when we met. The guy killed Wen Ruohan himself with a unique tactic. I'm digressing.*

*I'm too busy here. I can't afford for something to take up time, not when I need to invent more things. I'm a terrible hand at farming and they need me to make things livable.*

*Look at me, fretting about food and surviving when my sister is getting married. Even if I never liked the groom I still wanted to see her happy.*

*~~She was looking forward to me being there too.~~*

---

"Sometimes I wonder why there are so few pages," a man murmurs in a flower house. The courtesan (who is definitely going to get yelled at by the mama later for the way she's sitting) is deep in conversation with him.

"I mean... it's what they managed to recover. There's probably a lot more," she says. He nods seriously.

"I wonder how often he thinks of Hanguang-jun," a younger courtesan giggles. Then her face falls. "Thought."

"I don't think their... relationship is the matter to consider here," she hushes her sister. "They say there were dried tears on the page."

"He truly did love her as his sister," the man's friend sighs. "What a shame... I didn't realize families of such high power could get torn apart too."

"Not as easily, true... but I thought it was impossible," the courtesan nods. "It's all very tragic when you think about it." The men toast mournful cups at that.

"Especially when you realize there was not a single thing any of them could have done to stop it."

---

*A baby! A little Jin Ling! News reached here and Uncle Four broke out the wine with the first flowers from the Lotus Pond! I'm... maybe very tipsy right now. What the hell did he put in this?*

*But I gotta make him a present! It's a big deal! I don't have anything of value. We leave the villagers well enough alone and I can't use that money. We can't even afford certain tools.*

*The only thing that I can turn into a gift is my Jiang Clarity Bell.*

*Jiang Cheng didn't make me give it back. He wants me to come back. I understand that. I wish I had that option too.*

*I can't have him take the Wens to Lotus Pier. They're vulnerable there. And it's still... too raw a wound. I'm not quite so shameless. Besides, they're all demanding my head. Jiang Cheng doesn't have the manpower to fight the Jins right now.*

*But now is not a time to be sad. I'm an uncle!*

*I'm going to make something fit for a baby. A-Yuan said I should make him a toy because toys should be treasured forever. He still keeps the grass butterflies Lan Zhan bought for him on a whim.*

*I didn't have the heart to explain that toys don't get treasured so easily in that type of lifestyle. Wen Ning suggested something to protect him.*

*I know I'd never get to be his da-jiu... but this way I can protect him like one in my absence.*

---

“Wen Yuan is a clearly a child... but he seems far too old to have been born in the Burial Mounds. Or even under the Jin supervision,” a distinguished elder of the Jin notes. The Lan contingent share a look. They all have a sneaking suspicion. And it's about the currently absent Hanguang-jun's new adopted son.

“Sect leader, now that they've read the newest ones... the last group returned from our attempts to find more pages. They found a page in the wreckage. But just a single torn piece of a sheet of paper,” the Nie cultivator explains before the conference members. Nie Mingjue nods and Nie Huisang taps a fan over his lip thoughtfully.

“Okay?”

“It's got a child's handwriting on it,” the Nie cultivator finishes, a growl on his tongue. The room gasps. That's it. There were innocent Wens in those camps. Outrage breaks through the room.

Behind the fan, Nie Huisang smiles.

“What does it say, Da-ge?”

He bats his eyes, as innocent as any wastrel.

““My name is Wen Yuan. I am five years old,”” sect leader Nie reads softly. Nie Huisang's eyes age instantly into a look that's soft and bittersweet with the loss of a dear friend. On such a young and dandy young man, many find the look... wrong. Too old for such a youth.

They shift in their seats, uncomfortable with the picture. Nie Mingjue himself is not immune. But his little brother just shakes his head, disbelieving.

“That... looks like a writing exercise that...”

“That’s an exercise Wei Wuxian used when teaching his shidus to write,” Jiang Cheng says. There’s something short in his voice.

Barely enough to cover the deep well of rage and grief below it.

Everyone agrees to say nothing about it. They all know that Jiang Cheng hadn’t hated Wei Wuxian or even considered their bond dead until Wei Wuxian killed Jiang Yanli. Brotherly bonds don’t break that easily. The lingering regret of a burnt bridge must still remain.

“So that serves as confirmation,” Lan Xichen looks heartbroken as he said it. “We have committed a wrong and must atone for it.”

“You’re right,” Jin Guangyao says. “I just... I can’t understand how this was hidden from me. I am still searching for any documents, because anyone who reported to me gave me what I’d been sharing with all of you.”

“Because you’d have never stood for it, A-Yao,” Lan Xichen smiles sadly. “I’m sorry that you’re having to sit in an office that’s done that without being able to change it.”

“I should have looked into it, really,” Jin Guangyao insists. There’s a smile in his words that only Nie Huisang hears. The minor sect leaders begin to make their protestations but Jiang-xiong speaks first.

“You should have. But that’s not our point.”

“You’re right, Jiang-zhongzhu,” Jin Guangyao smiles that genial smarmy smile of his. Nie Huisang’s eyes narrow. “The point is, the currently indisposed chief cultivator has committed a crime.”

An old sect leader pounds a fist on the table before him.

“Where is he now?”

“He’s been in seclusion for the past few weeks and I took over administrative duties in place of Madame Jin, who is currently staying with the MeishanYu,” Jin Guangyao sighs. “I understand why, now.”

“As his only son, we would support you if you attempt to pressure an abdication,” sect leader He says seriously. “We can’t have another power-hungry man in the role of chief cultivator.”

And Jin Guangyao laughs, his hand covering all his teeth.

---

*I've been working on the protection charm. I want it to be potent. A sect heir needs something special, after all. Jiang Cheng would have made such a face at those words coming out of my mouth— hah! Looks like I did mature enough to think about politics. We both knew that in the end. ~~He tried to choose me over it. I couldn't let him.~~*

*The Wens are asking about Jin Zixuan. Didn't realize the soup incident and the uh... punching incident at Cloud Recesses got around that much. I think he deserved it then. I figure Shijie could put him in his place. And Jiang Cheng has fancy sect power now. Peacock boy won't be able to try anything.*

*Not that they'd need it. The fool finally realized how amazing Shijie is and begged her forgiveness, or so I've been told. And for some reason he makes her happy. I can tolerate him for that, at least. The peacock, harmless as he is, and Mianmian look like the only decent ones of the lot. And Meng Yao too, I guess.*

---

“Even Wei Wuxian knew that the new Jin-zongzhu would be good. What a man,” a traveling merchant laughs, clapping his hands as he regales another tavern.

“I'm just surprised at how fake the situation with Lord Jiang was,” a farmer sighs. His friend shakes his head, eyes dark.

“They lied to the world,” he grumbles. His friend elbows him harshly.

“What do you know of politics and strategy! Of course he did! He has to protect the rest of Lotus Pier! Haven't you seen what Jin Guangshan did to the Wens?! Harboring them or the one who broke them out while weak in numbers is not just suicide when you're a leader. It's inviting another massacre!”

“They sentenced that man to death, I heard,” the merchant sighs.

“What a shock!”

“I'm not surprised. It was mainly his son's efforts in that war of theirs,” a woodcarver sighs.

“His dead son. Who was killed by the Yiling Laozu,” the woodcarver's wife snips.

“Semantics,” the woodcarver waves off. His wife glares at him.

“I wouldn't necessarily say that!”

“What a man Lianfeng-zun is. Went from being lowly to a lord through hard work,” the songstress sighs. “I wonder what he's like!”

“He is very admirable!”

“Yes. Wei Wuxian had a lot of foresight.”

“Perhaps in a different life such brilliant men would have been friends,” the innkeeper sighs. The man drinking wine frowns into the jar.

“Poor Wei Wuxian. And those innocent Wen remnants. They’ve been avenged now, at least.”

“Not yet,” a man in the back of the room says with a frown. The others stare at him.

“Are you talking about Lord Jiang?”

“I’m talking about whoever made him lose his mind. Sect Leader Jiang was in the right,” the man shakes his head. “He had been fine all this time. Excited even! I don’t think Jin Guangshan would have acted with the intention was to kill his full-blooded heir.”

“It’s true,” the merchant sighs. “Oh, poor Lord Jiang! He must have been miserable, having to pretend that he hated his brother while putting him out of his misery like a mad dog!”

“Lord Jiang has been through so much and is still building up his sect to success. What incredible men the sect leaders are!”

---

*What’s odd, I realized today, was that I won’t be able to help teach him sword forms. Jiang Cheng is too awkward to be a teacher. And don’t get me started on Jin sword forms.*

*Ah, Jin Ling, don’t get mad when your jiujiu sounds mad, okay? He’s aggressive because he’s a ball of fluff underneath. And don’t let him name your sword, you hear?*

*Awful naming sense. Sandu was Madam Yu’s suggestion.*

*I’ve drawn some diagrams here like you’d ever see this.*

*This da-jiu is very sorry he can’t be by your side. One day, when we’re more stable, maybe you can come visit. The more I write this the more I look like a fool, but I can’t wait to see you grow up. Shijie’s going to raise you so well, I just know it. You’ve got the best mom ever, so don’t forget that!*

---

“The latest one was a letter to Jin-gongzi,” a maid whispers to another as she swaddles the now-orphaned young master. Her coworker freezes minutely.

“Oh,” she says. The first maid shakes her head with a sigh.

“For someone who couldn’t be protected by his sect, he truly does love his sect siblings.”

“It’s pretty much publicly known that he gave up his core for his brother and didn’t tell him because he didn’t want his brother to feel guilty,” a guard chimes in. The first maid nods. But the second maid isn’t convinced.

“That’s... fair. But what doesn’t make sense is... he loved Young Lady Jin so much. How could he have killed her?”

“The more I hear about these readings the more sure I am that he didn’t,” the first maid sighs. “He was handsome when I saw him at the banquets you know. Even after the rumors of demonic cultivation twisting his looks.”

“Do you think he was possessed? When he went berserk, I mean.”

The room goes pin-drop silent, all eyes snapping to the young servant who spoke. He backs away nervously.

“I- I mean... they always say that certain resentful ghosts will possess you the second they can. If they caught him in a moment of weakness...”

“But he’s so powerful?”

“He’s still... he was still human, in the end.”

And nobody in the room knows what to say to that.

---

*The skin on Wen Qing’s hands is cracking with the weather. I wish she’d let sell my talismans so I can buy wool. I asked her again. Same answer.*

*She doesn’t want anyone to have my work. Not when they treat me like this.*

*It’s not that different, really. My face is thick enough. It’s just a lot more death threats than Zidian beatings. I can manage. I just may sell the talismans anyway. Radish earnings only get so much.*

*These people aren’t going to survive if we don’t make money.*

*I dropped the bell and sent an entire squadron of fierce corpses fleeing. So... it definitely works well. Cleaning off that bloody goo is less than ideal. That it was ever there can be my secret. ~~I've gotten good at those.~~*

*Hahaha! I like that! I'll put it right under Baoshen Sanren and the time I tricked Lan Zhan into looking at porn.*

*Scratch that, making Lan Zhan look at porn is something to be proud of! It was hilarious!*

*I really shouldn't tease him too much, but ever the good man, he indulges me! How can I resist!*

*Every friendship needs its own banter byplay, you know. I think ours is great.*

---

"You know, I didn't expect such a satisfying end," Jin Guangyao hums. Su She laughs in agreement.

"You planned to kill him by drowning him in his greatest sin. Now you get to lord over his death while he lies at the bottom of the stairwell. Much better justice for you," Su She nods smugly. "And even better, less cleanup!"

"You know, when this is an option I don't know why I would have bothered letting it be private," Jin Guangyao muses.

"Mhm."

"There's just one problem," Jin Guangyao sighs, pulling out a pain reliever.

"The Jiangs," Su She finishes, taking the medicine. "Damn... the spell blowback is getting worse."

"With opinion like this, I can't accuse the Jiang of lying to the world. Jiang Wanyin has become a figure to feel heartbreak for and pride in," Jin Guangyao agrees. Su She toys with the bag.

"We could frame him for your brother's death?"

"Not enough evidence," Jin Guangyao immediately refuses. "But we do have Jin Ling. That will be enough to keep relations amicable while we try to find something."

"You could frame him for attempting to avenge Wei Wuxian by killing you," Su She shrugs. Jin Guangyao pauses.

"Now *that*... that is a thought indeed."



---

*I'm about to set off for Lanling today. The bell's packed and Wen Ning said he'd come with me to the visit. I don't know how good it is to leave— my presence alone is a deterrent but Wen Qing said she'd peel my skin off like a fruit if I kept myself from going on their behalf. The aunties were so excited to make festive clothes that I couldn't ruin it for them anyway.*

---

“There's no more entries, after that.”

“Things must have been... there have to be!”

“How could there be? He killed Jin Zixuan and went insane. Don't you remember?”

“I heard there was one more page but... they say it was incomprehensible. Written in blood.”

“So he truly did go mad.”

“Can you blame him?”

*It was a trap*

*It was a TRAP*

*Wen Ning and Wen Qing are GONE*

*HOW COULD THEY TAKE THEM FROM ME*

*MY FAMILY IS M I N E*

*K*

*I*

*L*

*L*

*THEM*

*A L*

*L*

## **i stop somewhere (waiting for you)**

Lan Xichen pauses by the door to the Jingshi. Inside, his brother is recovering. Whipped for protecting... for protecting the man he loved. Loves. An innocent person that Lan Xichen wronged with his own two hands.

He had been so afraid of Wangji becoming their father that... that he had broken the rules himself.

Jiang Wanyin couldn't protect his brother and even then he had *tried*. And Wei Wuxian had known it, too.

What did that make Lan Xichen? He's the leader of their sect. And it was their sect that he failed to control.

It's... it's shameful. All Lan Xichen, Zewu-jun and first jade of Lan, could do as a sect leader was beg. What kind of man is he, to bow to pressure so easily? The Lan were to be solid as bamboo in their ways.

He had bent in the wind.

He opens the door. Wangji is awake, lying on his stomach.

"Wangji--"

"You took his belongings, broadcasted his intimate thoughts to the world," Wangji says blandly. He won't even look at him.

Lan Xichen says nothing. How can he in the face of the sheer magnitude of his shame?

"You don't even want to lie to me?" Wangji asks, voice cracking with grief.

Lan Xichen looks away.

"Leave." It's a command. It's anger and indignation and... and *disappointment*.

Lan Xichen turns and goes.

"Sect leader?"

"Yes?"

A young disciple he does not recognize stands anxiously by the path to the Jingshi, a missive in his hands.

"Now that Wei Wuxian's name has been cleared, Lotus Pier is taking their opportunity to mourn their former head disciple," the disciple manages. It seems the heavens will serve to remind him of his shame, today.

“I see.”

“And they invited Hanguang-jun,” the young disciple continues nervously. “Out of respect for their relationship.”

“Wangji is in seclusion,” he says immediately. And he hates himself for how quickly he does it. Is he afraid? Afraid of broadcasting to the world his shame? The magnitude of his ineptitude and failures?

“Eh? Aren’t you a sect leader? If you say he’s out of seclusion then he’s out of seclusion,” the disciple frowns. Then he slaps a palm over his mouth, eyes wide. “Oh, I’m sorry. I will go to take my punishment immedi-“

“Stop. You are fine, and in the right for saying so,” Lan Xichen tries to smile and comes out a grimace.

“After the beginning of the mourning period, Sandu Shengshou has locked himself in partial seclusion, only fulfilling administrative duties from his study,” the disciple adds awkwardly. Lan Xichen looks back towards the Jingshi. Wangji is alive, certainly. But...

“I can’t blame him. How do you mourn losing a brother?”

Lan Xichen tries to refrain from wondering if that’s something they have in common.

---

Jiang Cheng is not a man of words. He’s not a man of vulnerability.

And the last living people to know it are gone.

There’s nobody left to fight, to avenge himself and his family. His brother had been driven to madness and he had no choice to kill him.

The core in his chest spinning isn’t his and that makes him ill to think about. Why would Wei Wuxian do this? His stupid hero complex truly knew no bounds!

And he’s angry. He knows why he didn’t tell them but it’s not enough.

They were family, damn it!

*Were.*

Because the people he loved most in the world are *dead*.

He’s alone. And in the end, it’s his fault. *He* killed Wei Wuxian.

Certainly, Jin Guangshan and Jin Zixun, his acknowledged killers, are dead. But they're... while incredibly greedy and obnoxious... they're simply not smart enough to plot his genius brother's downfall. The Wens he could see as their actions, questionably. Considering it was about as blatant and stupid as using elderly women as hunting targets. But Wei Wuxian? Someone had plotted his downfall and someone had plotted it to advantage for the Jin.

Not that it would have crossed his mind until he read the last page of the diary. His brother had gone through the Burial Mounds (twice, which he'd lied about *too*, what the fuck?!) with no issue. His sanity had been perfectly intact even in the war. He had been clearly traumatized, as they all were. But he hadn't been insane. Not then and not after. Not until...

Not until the day Jin Zixuan died. And as someone consistently (uncomfortably, unnecessarily) reminded about the threat a son who isn't heir is... well he finds it awfully convenient.

Something—or *someone* — had snapped Wei Wuxian's mind and led him to become... the monster everyone said he was.

Shouts break his train of thought.

“Jiang Cheng! You bastard! Get out here!”

“How dare you!”

He slams the doors of the family shrine, where Wei Wuxian's tablet now rests, open. Many of them stand outside of Lotus Pier, jeering from their boats. Inside are some important figures. An act of war already? So Jin Guangyao knows that he'd figured him out. Oh well.

“How dare you encroach on my territory,” he hisses. “You interrupt a mourning period for a main family member!”

“You'll be coming with us,” a man hiding behind Yao demands. How presumptuous!

“And you think the LanlingJin can step on the YunmengJiang?! Guards!”

Everyone, still in their mourning whites, arrive at the gates. He'd accepted many rogue cultivators and new disciples these past years. They too have joined the mourners. Some random guy from Ouyang dares point a finger at him and scream.

“You have attempted assassination, you think you do not have to pay?!”

And up the path glides the rat-like man himself.

“I don't know what your intent to avenge yourself was, but—”

“Shut up. Actually, shut the fuck up. Or I *will* shed your blood,” he sneers. The crowd of outsiders all gasp.

“He admitted it!”

“How insidious!”

“And all of you can stop jumping to conclusions because look where that took you last time,” Jiang Wanyin says snidely. The crowd falls silent instantly, suitably abashed.

“If you are not here to pay respects to Wei Wuxian of YunmengJiang, then leave,” a disciple snips. Yao, looking more like a baby with a sword than a sect leader, gasps and points an accusing finger.

“You-!”

“Will you disrespect another of my cultivators, Yao-zongzhu? I am *not* my father, you know.”

“Jiang-xiong,” from the crowd of white-robed mourners comes Nie Huisang. Nie Mingjue startles from the crowd at the gates.

“Nie-xiong,” he greets, considerably less coldly. Why bother? Nie Huisang had been just as angry as he was.

“I got it,” he says, handing him a red-tasseled stone. He hates that it’s being used so soon. Wei Wuxian had made it immediately after they reclaimed Lotus Pier from the Wens with a whisper of “*never again*” on his lips.

Jiang Cheng shatters it.

Instantly, a barrier forms around Lotus Pier. Most of the forces are outside. Mainly the sect leaders. And the greasy rat of a Chief Cultivator.

“I’d expected you to take a little longer, you know,” Jiang Cheng says mildly.

“Take a little longer to figure you out?” Yao-zongzhu shouts again. What an irritating little man. Jiang Cheng rolls his eyes.

“I wasn’t talking to you so shut your mouth for once in your life. And no. For Meng Yao here to make a pathetic power grab,” Jiang Cheng snaps. “You would have done well if you’d been satisfied. We were perfectly glad to give you a role if it meant your father would be punished. I wouldn’t have discovered your involvement in any of this. But you forgot something. One, little thing.”

“Oh?” Jin Guangyao smiles like a man who has already won and is indulging a pathetic enemy some bark. “And what is that?”

“Ouch, ouch! Hey stop pushing!” Nie Huisang cries out suddenly, tripping over a foot and landing on Su-zongzhu’s chest. He remembers that little wimp. Minor sect leader. Some sort of bad blood with the Lans. Odd for a poor imitation but he wasn’t going to begrudge the man’s that.

What he *is* going to do is choke him to death with Zidian for framing his brother.

Because there, on Su Minshan’s chest, is the blowback of the Hundred-Holes curse.

---

Nie Huisang sighs, watching it play out. Whatever Jiang-xiong was about to say— because he’s certainly figured out who is to blame— is cut off in the face of the bare chest. He snaps open his fan and puts on his usual “inept wastrel” routine (it’s a routine if it’s only half true, *okay?*) while an impromptu trial with er-ge as judge begins to play out. Needless to say that Su Minshan, traitor of Gusu, is loose-lipped.

San-ge really shouldn’t have trusted the man who let the Wens into the Cloud Recesses.

But that’s beside the point. Jiang-xiong executes Su Minshan with swift relish. His brother demands a shot at Jin Guangyao.

And the day goes down in infamy for the next few years. His brother miraculously recovers from the brink of death under er-ge’s care (“Oh? How odd, da-ge! I couldn’t *possibly* imagine why!”) and Lan Wangji is still missing from the public eye.

He stays missing for three years. And for every time he’s asked, er-ge looks more ashamed for it.

So Nie Huisang does what he does best. Get da-ge involved.

“That’s internal Lan sect politics. You can’t get anything done when the elders have more power than the sect leader,” da-ge shrugs. “I don’t know what they did to Wangji but I don’t think that’s a good sign.”

He never does find out. Sect regent Jin and Jiang-xiong are always awkward with each other, holding together only for the young Jin Ling.

“I just remember... I just remember being so *relieved*,” Jiang-xiong tells him one night. There are tears stubbornly refusing to leave his eyes and they’re both incredibly drunk, but Jiang-xiong had said it only then. “I was so afraid of him becoming... something else! And then he killed A-Jie and I thought he’d just become evil but he wouldn’t have ever wanted to! He wouldn’t have!” And it was true. The only difference between what they saw is that Nie Huisang had known from the start that Wei-xiong’s death would be a murder... or triggering something that would make it a mercy.

“In the end, killing him would have been mercy,” he intones, remembering generations of stories of Nie qi deviations. They’re far too melancholic, that night. Jiang-xiong pouts himself more wine, staring at his reflection in the glass once before downing the entire cup.

“Would it? Or is that something to tell myself too?”

“I don’t know,” his voice begins to slur. “I really don’t know.”

---

Wangji's back does recover. Eventually. Lan Xichen attempts every form of healing aid known to man. He regards the attempts with disdain. He values second chances, and honestly he doesn't really care anymore what this sect does to him... but the scars are...

It's almost pathetic how desperate he is for the scars to stay. For there to be something—anything—to tell him Wei Ying had touched his life.

For all the Lan sect asceticism, Lan Wangji will greedily cling to the physical, because what else does he have when the love of his life is *gone*? Years and days go by in apathetic silence, broken only by his son.

His sect leader brought his son to visit the way they had been brought to his mother, the way a son is brought to a criminal father. What crime? What crime is there beyond the ocean of injustices that none of them bother to search the depths of?

One fine morning, Sizhui warily takes him by the hand.

“Father? Can you... teach me how to play the song you're always playing?”

“Yes,” he says. And so he guides his son's fingers through the familiar motions of WangXian. Dancing over the curling edges and soft highs of a song for a first and last love. Sizhui looks at him and his face falls.

“Father... why do you look so lost?”

“It was meant to be a duet,” he says.

And it was.

In the cave, when he sang the unfinished version thinking it would never be completed, he had pictured the song on one instrument. A silly little dream of serenading Wei Ying from the docks of Lotus Pier and leading him like a lure into Gusu and into his arms.

During the war, he had hoped that Wei Ying would come to Gusu and his flute could be something to sing alongside his own instrument. It was on a night spent awake and worrying over Wei Ying that he rewrote the song for two.

“With what instrument?” Sizhui tilts his head with a young innocence that soothes a raw edge of his soul.

“Flute,” he tells his son, smoothing the edges of his hair. Shizhui brightens.

“Like Zewu-jun's xiao?”

And the idea of Lan-zhongzhu playing WangXian on a flute that had been used to... by a *man* who— the mere *insolence* that action would take!



“No. *Never* a xiao,” he manages. Seeing his face, his son clumsily hugs him.

“Sorry for bringing it up,” Sizhui whispers guiltily. Lan Wangji kisses his forehead.

“No need for apologies,” he assures. And Sizhui, his little A-Yuan, runs his fingers over the smooth edges of his guqin.

“What flute, then? If not a xiao?”

“A dizi.”

---

Time stubbornly marches onwards, the only true constant on this earth. Lan Yuan, now Lan Sizhui, has chosen to learn the dizi as a second instrument. He watches as he tries to name it, surrounded by eager friends.

The children around him all look at the instrument in awe.

“But what do I name it?”

“You could name it after a famous instrument or cultivation tool?” Lan Rong stares at the lacquer wistfully. “That’s what my mom always suggests!”

“There are a lot of famous flutes... but there’s only one famous dizi in recent memory,” Jingyi’s voice lowers, suddenly all-too-aware of his sect leader’s presence. But Lan Sizhui is still staring at the flute.

“Do you think... I could possibly live up to that?”

What a day, he thinks to himself with a morbid bit of mirth, what a day when young children look up to the grandmaster of demonic cultivation! And a Wen child, no less!

Ah, he rebukes himself, Sizhui is a Lan. He is the son of Wangji and therefore... therefore Lan Sizhui is his *nephew*. But how can he lay claim to such a role? How *dare* he?

“Wei Wuxian was a great man,” Lan Xichen says softly. “A martyr, in the end. But a man who was brilliant, inventing an entirely new path for sheer need of it, to stay with his family. The cultivation world has made a lot of mistakes with him. We wronged him greatly. But there is no harm in aspiring for his level of brilliance or selflessness. I think we could all afford to aspire for his optimism and kindness.”

“What was he like?” Lan Jingyi asks carefully. And Lan Xichen understands. It’s not every day you get to ask your sect leader for stories of or before the war. They’re all looking at him like he’s the authority when the truth is that... he hadn’t known Wei Wuxian at all.

“A troublemaker,” he laughs softly. “But he was kind. He saved many lives because of what he saw and we didn’t.”

“This disciple is confused,” a young disciple named Lan Chen frowns. “How can someone be good if they don’t follow all the rules?”

“Well, do the QingheNie and YunmengJiang follow all of our rules? They still try to be good, don’t they?”

The children nod hesitantly.

“Rules... the rules help build our discipline, which helps us build a strong foundation for a sense of morality. But discipline is not a replacement for morality. The Lan sect was just as responsible as the Yao or the Jin. Maybe even more so,” Lan Xichen explains. The disciples look at him, curious.

“Why?”

“Because they trusted us to make a decision that is right. After all, if we have so much discipline, our morality should have been strong too, right?”

“Wasn’t it?” Pei Wu, who is seven now, asks. And, heavens, Pei Wu had been in his mother’s *womb* when Wei Wuxian died. Has it really been so long?

“No,” Lan Xichen, the venerable Zewu-jun and first jade of GusuLan, admits. “It wasn’t even there in the choice we made. Our discipline made us too rigid to see clearly, to see over the black and white our rules set. And the entire world lost something that day.”

“Even you?” Lan Chen asks, awed. Lan Xichen looks at Sizhui and remembers, though it’s been years, the look of betrayal on his brother’s face as he told him to leave.

“Especially me,” he says.

---

And time indeed keeps inching forward no matter how much the past clings to us.

Sometimes, Jiang Cheng looks out at Lotus Pier and feels its *hollowness*. Certainly, new disciples have been raised into fine cultivators, those of Jiang who remained after the Sunshot Campaign repaired their battered hearts to face another day.

But there are ghosts here, visceral empty spaces. He stands where the dock he would lie on with their shidis used to be. The wood doesn’t creak anymore, and the people who lay here with him are all long dead.

“Wei Wuxian,” he whispers the name into clear night air. “I put your name into the family shrine. Even if you’d have never accepted it. If you have a problem with it well... well then

you'd better get your ass over here and say it to my face!"

The air doesn't respond. It's air.

The same air that Jiang Cheng has been talking to like his brother could hear him through it for almost ten years.

"Jin Ling turned ten last month, you bastard. That's a decade of missed birthdays. You and A-Jie are g-gone and what's he stuck with to raise him, huh?! Me! And he's like me too, and you'd hate it. But he's like you in a lot of ways, too. Got *your* pain in the ass trouble-seeking streak."

The ghost of Wei Wuxian's laugh haunts Lotus Pier.

"Ge... I don't know how much longer I can keep on without you."

---

Nie Huisang drops by Yunmeng on the thirteenth anniversary with wine in hand. And... he hates that word. "Anniversary" dares to sound happy about this. Like Wei-xiong was a terrible beast they all vanquished.

But there's no other word. Wei-xiong would have made a terrible joke about wanting a huge LanlingJin type of party, opulent and ridiculous, to celebrate his life. Jiang-xiong would have said it's a crazy thing to do and Wei-xiong would have laughed and said it fit him perfectly.

Well, he thinks grimly, what Wei-xiong is getting is thirteen and counting years of heavy grief and the knowledge that if they had done something, *anything*, he could have lived a little longer.

Today, he's going to corner sect leader Jiang, his only living friend who was close enough to Wei Wuxian to feel a similar ache, and get completely and utterly drunk. They swore brotherhood over wine and grief early on in the days After Wei Wuxian. And now they meet to get shitfaced because heavens know facing this day of the year—he lost a best friend and Jiang-xiong both his siblings—sober in any way is torture. If his brother hadn't warned him against getting Lans drunk, he'd have invited Hanguang-jun.

"It's awful," Jiang-xiong says with no preface. They've been mourning long enough that it's not necessary. "I'm still looking at problems that I *know* he'd be fascinated by, have some harebrained scheme to fix, and I look up to ask him like he hasn't been gone for over a fucking decade."

"They're still trying to gather his soul, like their apologies mean *anything* to a dead man," Nie Huisang spits. "Like Wei-xiong ever have a shit about reputations and face."

"You know he didn't," Jiang-xiong tries to snort but all he manages is a snuffle, "he was brave."

“To a fault,” Nie Huisang sighs wistfully.

“Reckless bastard,” Jiang-xiong grumbles quietly. “Why did he have to try so hard?”

“Maybe that’s what drew so many people to him,” Huisang chuckles softly. “He always did impress me.”

“The only man suited to be my right hand and head disciple,” Jiang Cheng scoffs with pride. “Anyone who dares step into his place will learn their own. Quickly.”

“Didn’t you blast a Yu cultivator that noisily asked if you were going to get someone to take on the duty of your right hand with Zidian?” Nie Huisang swallows the wine. It’s Emperor’s Smile. That was his favorite.

“He’s not my cousin, and I’m owed more respect. As is my brother’s seat,” Jiang-xiong shakes his head. “That is only a seat for a brother to take.”

“Mm-hm! I’ll drink to that,” Nie Huisang grins, knowing that Jiang-xiong would kiss Yao-zongzhu with tongue before he willingly left Huisang in charge. Jiang-xiong stares into the slightly golden wine.

“I know you’ve been worried about your brother’s health lately,” he says.

“Yeah. But older brothers just can’t seem to listen,” Huisang sighs. And it’s true.

“Don’t I know it,” Jiang-xiong grumbles. “Try not to end up like me.”

“I will,” Huisang swears. And he means it. He doesn’t know if saying that means anything though.

“I wish Wei Wuxian was here,” Jiang Cheng says softly. Nie Huisang dutifully ignores the tears streaking down his sworn brother’s face.

“He always knew what to do,” Nie Huisang agrees, throat raw with the vulnerability this admission always took.

“I miss him.”

“Me too.”

They look comfortable, most days, like they’ve settled into themselves and had reached a point in life where they knew what to do. In some ways, maybe they have. But in this way? They’re as lost as small children, waiting to be pointed where to go.

## **voices (some would sing and some would scream)**

Thirteen years pass with injustice and his own mistakes wearing into his skin. Thirteen years pass and Jiang Cheng expects to see his whole life in mourning.

How twisted had he become, of the two of them? The truth he'd never admitted is that he had known about the Wens before the Nie and before the Lan because he had gone there. Spoken to Wen Ning.

The truth is that he will never forgive them for helping Wei Wuxian do what he did to himself. The truth is that doctors and elderly or not, he had seen the thing binding his brother to needing that stupid Yin Hu Fu and thought, selfishly, that if they were gone he could come back to Lotus Pier. Naively, he had thought that if he had no one to protect, he'd stop needing resentful energy. After all, he had claimed a tie to Baoshen Sanren! She could fix a melted core so of course she could heal whatever had tainted Wei Wuxian's own.

Apparently that was a complete lie, and any hope of having his family together had shattered with the attack on his home.

"It was a similarity we shared," he whispers to Wei Wuxian's tablet. "You who would do anything to protect those you felt a duty to, and I would as well. But you felt a duty to everyone. And me... well I would have chosen you. And really... and really, you would have hated that. Why did you leave? I didn't want you to go."

He thinks back to the broken arm that healed in a day and laughs. He'd stabbed Wei Wuxian with tears in his eyes. Had that wound ever healed properly? Not that his stupid, idiot brother would ever fucking tell him that.

A crash of thunder sweeps the air and Jiang Cheng falls to his knees and prays.

"Whatever deity lies up there... can you tell him that his brother knows he kept his promise? And that I'm sorry for breaking mine?"

---

Fourteen years pass since the death of Wei Wuxian. It's an empty day in an empty Jinlintai courtyard, and Mo Xuanyu is aimless. The disciples are wary of him, who is weak in cultivation, for who his father was. For who his brother became.

There's a new koi in the pond. A gift, from the YunmengJiang to the Jin sect heir. His nephew, technically, but Mo Xuanyu is just a disciple in the masses. He forgets he's even of the main clan some days. It's all very whatever. Cultivation isn't all it's cracked up to be. He wishes he could focus on something other than the sword. Not that watching sweat against

hard-packed muscle for hours isn't an amazing pastime, but doing sword drills himself is boring and uncomfortable. He'd much prefer playing music all day like a Lan or being a patron of the arts like the famed Nie sect leader. It's a bit of an open secret that he'd been the one to reveal Jin Guangyao's treachery. He's also a known sponsor of the many, many operas and heroic novels about the Yiling Laozu.

Xuanyu watches the koi fish swim wildly, confused by the new walls of its home. How pitiful it seems, taken from the nice wide waters and stuck into a cage. Waters where it has no choice but to swim alone.

Was the Yiling Laozu like this fish? Was he... was he like Xuanyu? Taken from the openness and all he had known to a new place where he was alone? Lonely and afraid?

Mo Xuanyu stares into the water and sings softly.

“And so ends the legend of the Yiling Laozu...”

---

Fifteen years pass, a cascade of water where droplets fell slowly. A morbid part of himself knows that a child born that night would have been the age Wangji had met... him. Wei Wuxian was a menace. Rule-breaking and irreverent. His very existence seemed to be to break the rules that shielded them from... the rules that should have shielded them from the wrongs they committed. A minor part of himself acknowledges the humor in their treatment, and later execution, of Wei Wuxian being the wrong they committed. And Wei Wuxian, for all of his childish, trouble-making actions... he was a good man. He was righteous and acted with love of all. He did not comport himself like a gentleman, but for all his rough actions that's what he was. He invented and created and saved. He looked beyond biases and acted selflessly and kindly. It is a terrible shame that they couldn't have helped him. That they couldn't have saved him. It is a terrible stain on all of their clans, one they must bear in penance.

Wangji, his precious nephew, had loved him. Had seen the good in him. Had seen the bad in them.

He looks up at the setting sun and pours a second cup of tea.

Lan Qiren raises his own cup and toasts.

“I bid you farewell, one of the greatest students to have ever passed through my classroom.”

---

Sixteen years pass and thousands of new faces come and go. But that is not the matter no to him. He is the leader of a sect that is nothing he'd thought it was as a child. Is nothing the world thought it was. They hid behind their rules and self-righteous and false assumptions of purity. Corruption was gilded in not gold but marble and jade. What were they beyond rotting wood under too much lacquer?

Lan Xichen doesn't know anymore.

He's lost everything to this sense of righteousness. His father, then his mother, then his childhood, then his own sense of morality, and then his brother.

Lan Xichen looks down at the rejection of a guest disciple stay from YunmengJiang and sighs.

"I suppose it's better, for things to not go back to the way they were before."

---

Seventeen years pass and the world doesn't change very much. How can it, when the ones who changed it have set aside their tools and live day to day lives? Jiang-xiong mourns in brotherhood alongside him. They mourn changes they could not make. Jiang Wanyin lost his brother and Nie Huisang is about to lose his own.

Nie Mingjue, former sect leader Nie (he gave up the title and Huisang's still mad) and Chifeng-zun, is declining. He's declining the way any Nie sect leader would. Except for the fact that he's doing it faster and leaving no sons.

He's going to die and the last brotherhood of the great sects will shatter. (Because as alive as Er-ge and Lan Wangji are, everyone knows that Lan Wangji considers their brotherhood dead.)

Really, for all his lacking faith in Nie Huisang, he sure is fine heaping responsibility on his birdlike shoulders from beyond the grave. But Nie Huisang can't even be resentful right now. (Well, he can. And he can hide it the way Jiang Wanyin hid the way he missed Wei Wuxian even when he hated him. But it's not fair. It's just not fair.)

There's only one person who could have fixed this. Only one person who could have altered this course of reality. A person who can't even be reached by a prayer or curse. And truly, Nie Huisang doesn't know if he could ever bring him back. He really doesn't know.

Nie Huisang looks to the sky and screams.

"WEI WUXIAN!"

---

Eighteen years pass, and his grandmother finds the body of the Ghost General in the annals of the Jinlintai.

Jiujiu concedes that the Ghost General could talk, but when they can't wake him up, they bury him with proper rites. YunmengJiang had insisted on burying him on their land. On the grounds of being family of Wei Wuxian. Jin Rulan is the one to agree to it. Because he's in charge of things like that now. Because Jin Rulan has become an adult. Has grown up to take the position from his grandmother when the person handing it off should have been his father.

(Of course, they don't talk about it. But it's clear, someone broke Wei Wuxian's mind, knowing who it would kill and what it would lead to.)

Today is the day they declare him sect leader once and for all. They didn't do it on his birthday, or for any of the six months after. It wasn't the right time.

(How could they do it on the anniversary of an atrocity committed by their own sect? On the day his father died? Or his mother? Or his da-jiu? They wouldn't even do it on the anniversary of his grandfather's execution. Not even on the day of his half-uncle— who he hates more than he knew he could have hated someone— had been caught and killed by jiujiu.)

But it's today and they're not waiting any longer. So Jin Rulan is in the family shrine.

"It's my turn to take the role of sect leader. Grandmother has been regent and teaching me for a long time. Jiujiu's given me some lessons too. And they both were so good... It's... I'm going to make all of you proud. I'm going to do the right thing... I swear on it."

Jin Ling kneels before the tablets and laughs.

"Mother, father, da-jiu... *I'm scared.*"

---

Nineteen years pass, and Jin Zixuan's son finally took over the sect. A small part of Qingyang wants to visit and see him, but... there's too many memories in that place. Some more bittersweet than others... but many, many bad ones.

Luo Qingyang finds herself blessed with two beautiful children. She names her daughter Mianmian, and can't help but recall that Wen indoctrination, fateful as it was. Is it any wonder that she names her second, a beautiful baby boy, Xian?

It's a relief her husband isn't concerned. Whatever mild teenage attraction she had when they met firmed into a genuine respect for a man who leapt in the way of danger just for her face. Though... to be fair, Lan er-gongzi was the clear one who held Wei Wuxian's heart. And to be even more fair, what man worth marrying gets jealous over a dead man?



It's a regular, ordinary afternoon when Luo Qingyang remembers what the date is. It's the anniversary of the day that she protested against the judgement of Wei Wuxian. It's the anniversary of the day that she bid a life of pandering farewell and chose to grow in her own right. It's the anniversary of the day she threw golden robes to the floor and declared she would have no part in gilding the rot of that sect.

Her fate had turned, today. She looks at the sky and her free life, a husband who willingly wanders the world with her. His selflessness, his bravery, his refusal to sit by injustices. It was Wei Wuxian who inspired her to do more, to be better.

And now she's here, living the kind of life she'd never have been able to imagine as Jin Zixuan's retainer.

Luo Qingyang looks to the sky and calls out.

"Wei Wuxian! Wherever you are... thank you!"

---

Twenty years pass without notice. Lan Sizhui runs the ribbon through his fingers. It is he, as Hanguang-jun's son, who must do this act of duty.

Lotus Pier sent one of Wei Wuxian's old ribbons. Every Lan knows what a ribbon means. It is marriage, it is family. Coming from the Jiang sect leader, it is approval.

The ribbon is red as beating blood, as love and passion, it's what he'd dare call a wedding red. Sect leader Lan had knelt at the gates of Lotus Pier for a week, for them to send this, begging them not to bury him until he obtained this one gift. A final wish for Hanguang-jun. For the brother whose soul he had rent by his negligence and prejudice. For the actions of a single year, he had forever lost his brother's love and trust for the rest of his life. It's chilling, knowing his father died wanting his brother far from his bedside. Even now, Lan Xichen does not dare intrude.

Such thoughts are forbidden, by the Lan sect rules. But Sizhui is the son of that brother, and will not forgive so easily. Lans love once.

Hanguang-jun, his father, the shattered jade of Lan, who could bear a life without his soulmate no longer. Faithful as a rising sun, steadfast in his love, how can he live so many years without him? More time after him than he ever had with him?

Sizhui looks at his father, face not a day older than it had been the day Wei Wuxian died, body glistening with preservation sigils until this ribbon could be found. His father could have become an immortal, he knows. He was powerful enough, kind enough, worthy enough. But he'd chosen this, to fulfill a wish for Sizhui to grow up well, and then to leave this earth. A small, dark piece of himself knows that. He is A-Yuan on the pages of that journal, and he is the last wish that Hanguang-jun could have fulfilled.

In the in-between moments of dreams and waking, what visions haunt these greats, Sizhui must wonder. What haunted his father? What haunted Wei Wuxian? What haunts sect leader Jiang and sect leader Lan?

Lan Sizhui wraps the ribbon around his father's limp wrist and says nothing at all.

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